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The accident of the region. A strategic relational perspective on the construction of the region's significance. second revision

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The accident of the region. A strategic relational perspective on the construction of the region's significance. Revised version

### **Short Abstract**

What explains the strong performative of the 'region' in academic and popular perceptions? This paper explores this question at two levels, namely that of broader political, economic and social shifts and that of institutional and discursive mediations. The assessment uses an evolutionary perspective based on the Strategic Relational Approach (SRA) and recent institutional-discursive elaborations. Specific attention is paid to questions of spatial-scalar configurations and economic versus non-economic aspects of regional development.

### **Abstract**

Both in academic debate and in popular perceptions the region is presented as an important entity in economic, political, social and spatial processes. This has resulted in a strong performative role of the region not only in mainstream debates across these domains, but also in a wide range of political and policy processes and practices. Recent critiques have challenged certain key features of the dominant perception of the region, notably its portrayal of the region as something bounded and fixed. But what triggered the emphasis on the region in the first place? To what extent can the significance of the region be attributed to broader political, economic and social shifts? To what extent does it present a more accidental outcome of processes and actions that, in combination, happened to put the region centre stage? To address explore these questions, this paper will adopt the Strategic Relation Approach (SRA) launched by Jessop and further developed by Hay and Sum. This approach advances a historical perspective on the production of hegemonic concepts and also seeks to integrate 'softer' discursive approaches within a broader, structuralist perspective. The result is a more precise

identification of how certain more structural changes and shifts induced moments for the creation of new discursive articulations and actions oriented towards the region.

## Introduction

Studies on region formation have strongly benefited from recent discussions on the constructivist and relational nature of regions and scale, and on 'scalar politics' against the backdrop of globalisation (BRENNER, 1999, HAMILTON, 2002, LAGENDIJK, 2002, MACLEOD and GOODWIN, 1999, SWYNGEDOUW, 1997). These accounts shed light on the proliferation of regional regimes as manifested across Europe, including city-regional regimes, cross-border regions, regional economic districts and clusters, rural development areas, various subnational/subfederal regional divisions etc. (HERRSCHEL and NEWMAN, 2002, KEATING, 1998, LE GALÈS and LEQUESNE, 1998, LUKASSEN, 1999). But the critical question remains, how the rising significance of the region, in both an analytical and normative sense, is itself predicated upon a wider set of cultural, political, economic and policy practices. How did the region, with all its associated concepts, turn into such an apparently dominant or 'omnipresent' imaginary (see Jones, Macleod and Harrison in this issue?)?

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The answer to such questions has traditionally been sought in working with either a structurally oriented or an agency-oriented approach. Structurally, the rise of the region can be seen as a logical outcome of broader trends and pervasive developments, such as globalisation, flexibilisation of production, state restructuring, and urban expansion. The analysis then focuses on how a limited set of tendencies, economic, political, social, have privileged the region in spatial and scalar developments. In agency-oriented perspectives, regions are seen as constructed, discursively and materially, through a myriad of processes, performing through their own logics, routines and practices, and manifesting their own momentum and temporarily stable outcomes. Recent so-called 'soft' approaches have focused on specific practices related to economic innovation and clustering, strategic spatial planning, sustainability and collaborative, inclusive approaches to planning (CHATTERTON, 2002, CLEMENT, 2000, GLASMEIER, 2000, GOVERDE, 2003, LAGENDIJK, 2005, MASKELL and MALMBERG, 1999, RAVETZ and ROBERTS, 2000, VIGAR et al., 2000).

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Recent theoretical work has attempted to bring these perspectives together rather than seeing them as opposites. More specifically, this paper responds to calls to embed such 'softer' notions in a more structurally and historically oriented account with more emphasis on broader political-economic conditions and transitions (GORDON MACLEOD, 2001). An intriguing question is for instance to what extent specific practices and associated ideas can be seen as channels of mediation, or even causal mechanisms for, broad-scaled political-economic and spatial processes (cf. JESSOP, 2004a, JESSOP, 2004d)? We need a perspective, therefore, that is able to straddle both levels of analysis, that of broader changes

and specific practices. The main inspiration for such a perspective will be the Strategic Relation Approach (SRA) as developed by Jessop, Hay and Sum, amongst others.

The structure of the contribution is as follows. After introducing the key research question, the first part of the paper will discuss the SRA, with a specific focus on discursive developments. Then, Sum's perspective on the production of hegemony will be presented, which will shed light on the rise of 'regional imaginaries'. The combination of the SRA and Sum's approach is particularly helpful since it draws the attention to the way the discursive dimension is intertwined with material, economic as well as non-economic aspects.

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Using this conceptual apparatus, the second part will shed light on the rise of 'regional imaginaries' in more detail. By necessity, the latter is based primarily on a review of broad observations and selected evidence.

### **The rise of regional imaginaries – an initial exploration**

Geographers have long been struggling with the dilemmas of structuralism and functionalism on the one hand, and voluntarism on the other. In structuralist accounts, regional developments tend to be read off from broader developments, relegating regions to by-products of global change. In voluntarist accounts, regions basically determine their own fate. Massey (1979) was one of the first to discuss to what extent the region itself presents a causal force or an agent, versus the wider spatial structures through which regions are constituted, such as the spatial division of labour controlled by corporate power. Whereas Massey focused on the role of organisations, work inspired by the Regulation Approach explored the critical role of institutional development at various spatial levels in shaping a temporally and spatially differentiated capitalist economy (e.g. PECK and TICKELL, 1991). Marrying Marxist with institutionalist approaches, the Regulation Approach is concerned with how the fundamental contradictory and crisis-ridden nature of capitalism is mediated through time- and space specific institutional arrangements. These arrangements bear upon, in particular, labour relations, the role of the state, international relations, and the money and enterprise form. Recent work has also taken into account discursive aspects of socio-economic development, providing a richer picture of how certain arrangements become (temporarily) hegemonic (JESSOP, 2004a, LEWIS et al., 2002).

Inspired by the work of Massey and the regulationist writings, geographers have further explored the role of space-bound institutions in economic and social development, increasingly zooming in on the region. The interest turned, in particular, to 'soft' institutional factors, to conventions of communication, interaction and collective action embedded in regional socio-economic environments or 'worlds' (STORPER, 1997). In so doing, the literature attempted to move further away from what were regarded 'structuralist' approaches,

countering their insensitivity to spatial diversity, and, in particular, to capacities of local agents and arrangements to make structural difference in the course of regional development. Both regulatory and institutionalist writings, hence, provide a framework for understanding the position and significance of the region by looking how local forms of development, interaction and agency are shaped in the context of broader forms and changes. In such a view, regions are political, institutional and discursive *constructs* of which the development is structurally conditioned and enabled, but not fully determined, by external conditions.

Despite these moves, however, determination and causality remain highly problematic issues. 'Soft' institutionalism, on the one hand, seems to have overstepped its mark by reducing the 'external' dimension to a simple set of global forces to which locally embedded, interactive agents may respond through collective forms of action (GORDON MACLEOD, 2001). They are so much focused on local (inter)action as a socio-cultural phenomenon that they ignore broader economic specificities and contingencies (JESSOP and SUM, 2006). Comparable to neo-liberal perspectives, local development **presents** as endogenous responses to a uniform, and inexorable set of external challenges. So, ironically, while its 'soft' tone appeals strongly to academics and professionals committed to regional development, **there is a serious danger that** the approach **actually plays** into the hands of local agents pursuing a neo-liberally oriented 'competitiveness' agenda (LOVERING, 1999).

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The Regulation Approach, on the other hand, makes a major contribution to critical institutionalist thinking in providing a sophisticated account of how capitalism evolves in a variety of time- and space-specific forms, and of how these forms interrelate at macro and meso levels. The approach shows a poor capability, however, to conceptualise the micro-level (individual, organisational, collective) in a non-instrumentalist way, to apprehend the relation between culture, discourses and action, and to conceptualise the interaction between global, national, local/regional levels (MACLEOD, 1997). Despite the interest in how institutions are mediated through time and place, and hence in institutional plurality and socio-economic variability, current writings continue to show a marked tendency to infer institutional transformations from perceived changes in capitalism at the macro level (GORDON MACLEOD, 2001, PECK, 2002). **In particular,** geographical work appears to hold on to models in which, and institutional change is associated primarily with transitions between modes of regulation (Fordist, Post-Fordist) (GOODWIN, 2001, JONES, 1997).

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As GOODWIN (2001) points out, we should be very careful with translating and projecting regulatory concepts onto the regional or urban level (cf. COLLINGE, 1999). He thus advocates, in line with more sophisticated regulatory approaches (JESSOP and SUM, 2006) to perceive the notion of regulation more in terms of *process* than of structure or mode: "If we use the concept of 'regulation as process' rather than that of 'mode of regulation' (...) we can investigate issues at the urban level – such as transport, housing, social polarisation, employment

change and economic development – and still maintain a purchase on how each of these is related both to each other and to wider sets of social, economic and political processes” (Goodwin, 2001, p. 82). Goodwin thus concludes that: “The use of the regulation approach would lead to the conclusion that for those interested in local changes in housing, planning and welfare provision, the local state and local governance cannot be fully understood outside their roles (both positive and negative) in the ebb and flow of regulation. However, the point should also be made that neither can they be fully understood within them. The institutions and practices of local and regional government have their own histories and patterns of development” (p. 84-85). This points, once more, to the need for a sophisticated account of both more structural and agency-oriented (or strategic) aspects of spatial development.

### **Bringing both ‘structure’ and the ‘subject’ back in: the Strategic Relational approach**

How can we account for spatial phenomena, and the way they are, to repeat Goodwin’s words, “related both to each other and to wider sets of social, economic and political processes”, and how do we assess the forms and objects of governance bearing on this kind of dynamics? The approach adopted here is the Strategic Relational Approach (SRA) initially developed by JESSOP (2001). The SRA seeks to develop an evolutionary, non-functionalist account of capitalist development, based on the claim that:

“capitalist social formations and bourgeois social order do not pre-exist societalization. Instead, the spaces and scales on which they exist, their temporal rhythms, their crisis-tendencies, and so on, in short, their basic features and structural forms, are the product of attempts to envision, institute, and consolidate a more or less coherent and manageable set of economic relations and their extra-economic conditions of existence” (JESSOP, 2003, p.143-144)

Contributing to a cultural perspective on political economy, the SRA acknowledges the value of ‘constructivist’ notions in assessing processes of institutionalisation, identity formation and discursive turns, and the resulting production of stable structures and (temporarily) hegemonic ideas. Such processes, through repetitive strategic manipulations, become *structurally inscribed* in more or less stable, selective settings. This makes structures inherently *relational* and subject to strategic manipulations.

The SRA thus assigns a specific meaning to ‘structure’ and the role of subjects (agency). Inspired by Offe’s and Poulantzas’ discussion on selectivity, the SRA sees structures as inherently concrete, rooted in space and time. Agency plays a significant role in (re)shaping structures, yet the scope for reflexive action and learning is conscribed by what JESSOP (2004b, p. 9) calls ‘structurally inscribed strategic selectivity’: “the recursive selection of strategies and tactics depends on individual, collective, or organizational learning capacities and on the

'experiences' resulting from the pursuit of different strategies and tactics in different conjunctures" (cf. Fig. 1). On the basis of such behaviour, we may add, agents will acquire, and shape, particular *identities* that will help to associate themselves with supportive actors and processes. Structurally inscribed strategic selectivity will also result in the constitution of particular objects of governance (like competitiveness, sustainability or social responsibility). Grafted onto a social-constructivist perspective on action, institutions and the formation of structures, the SRA thus adopts an evolutionary approach to social change. Stable patterns, based on what Jessop describes as 'structured coherence', emerge through a process of recursive selection and retention of strategies and practices that are, also through reflection, oriented towards 'structurally-inscribed strategic selectivity' (Jessop, 2001). As a result, strategies and practices are both *path-dependent* and *path-shaping*.

Building on Jessop's work, HAY (2002) sets out to further explore the meaning of strategic selectivity and strategic action from an agency perspective. In Hay's view, actors are intentional, but also largely driven by intuition and habits. Strategic action is based on a combination of reflexivity, learning and practical consciousness: "Actors are reflexive and strategic and they orient themselves and their strategies towards the environment within which their strategic intentions must be realised. Yet they are by no means blessed with perfect information of that context. At best their knowledge of the terrain and its strategic selectivity is partial; at worst it is demonstrably false" (p. 9). An important factor in this process of strategic orientation is how the wider context and the consequences of past and possible future actions are *discursively* mediated and understood. In each case, only certain ideas and narratives shedding light on a situation will prevail, turning into temporarily 'hegemonic' imaginaries. The concrete *representation* of a particular context thus plays an essential role in its evolution (Fig 2). One should bear in mind, moreover, that the relationship between representation and the effect of action is not a direct one, since the latter is also influenced by distribution of resource, procedural specificities and the power agents can wield. However, when certain critical conditions - economic, political or social processes- underlying a specific situation are seriously misrepresented, this is likely to result in failure or even crisis.

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As Figure 2 shows, a key aspect of discursive selectivity is the role of the strategically selective context. To conceptualise the more 'structural' (selective) effects of discourses, Sum proposes to draw from the work of Fairclough, particularly the notion of 'genre chains' (CHOULIARAKI and FAIRCLOUGH, 2000). A genre denotes the way a specific professional or academic community develops and applies certain conventions and uses of language (discourse) serving a particular communicative goal. In the context of regional development, one can think of genres on regional-economic development, democracy and political significance, social-cultural aspects and sustainability. A *genre chain* represents the networks that interconnect separate genres, often through processes of re-contextualisation, and serves to translate ideas in specific forms (such as policy



documents and strategy reports). Genre chains are the key discursive vehicles for powerful agents in the field (such as government departments, business organisations, core associations and consultants, academics, NGOs) to define imaginaries, notably economic imaginaries such as on competitiveness, innovation and workfare. In the words of Jessop (2004a, p. 5)

“Economic imaginaries at the meso- and macro-levels develop as economic, political, and intellectual forces seek to (re)define specific subsets of economic activities as subjects, sites, and stakes of competition and/or as objects of regulation and to articulate strategies, projects and visions oriented to these imagined economies”.

When established, such imaginaries breed discursive selectivity, acquiring their own performative and constitutive force. They are, in turn, an important factor in producing broader strategic selectivities (cf. Fig. 2). Yet, this selectivity, and the hegemony it sustains, can always be contested through the ways subjects, intentionally or even unintentionally, create new varieties and (re)combinations in meanings and practices. In some cases such a development may come to the aid of existing forms of structural coherence, by further limiting the scope of imaginable actions and possible material and political support for alternative trajectories. New varieties may also have destabilising, path-changing effects, by mobilising sufficient discursive, political and material support to envisage and enable alternative courses of action. However, given the uncertainties and complexities surrounding social change, achieved transformations are unlikely to be fully intentional. While they may be triggered and driven by intentional actions often of a visionary nature, they are the outcome of an accumulation of incremental changes each guided by recursively produced strategies and tactics (JESSOP, 2001). We will now assess this evolutionary process in more detail with the help of Sum’s account of the emergence of hegemonic imaginaries.

### The historical production of hegemonic imaginaries

The production of hegemony is the result of a long-winded, unique history which can be characterised by various crucial moments of discursive and strategic selection. Periods of gradual change, which can be explained largely in terms of path-dependency, are punctuated by moments in which paths may change. In such moment, ‘counter-hegemonic’ discourses and practices may cause new imaginaries to take priority, power relations to be overturned, and new forms to emerge. Building on the SRA and its discursive elaborations, SUM (2004) distinguishes between five crucial moments within the production of hegemony, which, in a slightly modified form, will be adopted here to reflect on the emergence of the region as a powerful imaginary (Fig. 3).

The *first* moment is when a window for change opens. ~~Changes in structural~~ circumstances prompt the development of new discourses that aim at the reconstitution of core objects of governance and identities of agents. Such changes can be twofold. They can be triggered by a (perceived) ~~political-~~

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economic transformation external or internal to a particular process, producing a turning or tipping point that open a window for change (BUIBELAAR et al., 2003). *Second*, new or modified repertoires of discourses emerge that, however, remain constrained by overall structural conditions and social relations. *Third*, this structurally inscribed strategic selective moment is followed by an (inter)discursive selective moment, in which genre chains play a critical role. In the words of SUM (2004, p.9): “These genre chains impose limits on what can be articulated with what across different discourses. This guides the combination of certain symbols that contribute to the support or reinvention of the hegemonic objects, imaginaries and projects.” Genre chains are mediated by key actors that set about to articulate new ‘problems’ and ‘aims’ (including notions of *objects* of governance) and associated ‘solutions’ and ‘means’ (including notions of *subjects* of governance). These actors also play a key role in translating these in general codes for wider circulation and absorption. Further stabilisation is achieved by the shaping of new metaphors and technologies of knowledge. These serve four prominent goals:

- (1) the framing of problem-solution perceptions,
- (2) the definition of the discursive position of ‘experts’,
- (3) the production of standards and scripts for assessment and documentation (e.g. ways of assessing ‘successful’ regional performance, scripts for policy evaluation, templates for drafting regional plans, etc.) and
- (4) building regimes of control through setting key mechanisms of ordering, labelling, categorising, and prioritising.

The *fourth* moment occurs when the new discourses and genre chains become somehow embodied in the subjectivities, practices and performances of agents and organisation ‘in the field’. New hegemonic imaginaries and associated codes of practice thus start to infuse routine practices and events. *Fifth* and finally, these discursive practices become regularised and institutionalised in new forms of governance. These forms of governance serve to secure a certain level of patterning of structural coherence, and embody new kinds of power relations and social privileges.

### **The spatial production of hegemonic imaginaries**

So far we have largely focused on the temporal dimension of hegemony. In what sense do the SRA and Sum’s approach present a spatially relevant approach? This issue is met with some ambivalence. JESSOP (2001, p.1227) himself stresses the inherent spatiotemporal character of the SRA: “spatiotemporal features should not be seen as accidental or secondary features of institutions, but as constitutive properties that help to distinguish one organization, institution, or institutional order from another.” (...) “spatiotemporal selectivity of an organization, institution, or institutional ensemble involves the diverse modalities in and through which spatial and temporal horizons of action in different fields are produced, spatial and temporal rhythms are created, and some practices and strategies are privileged and others made more difficult to realize according to

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how they 'match' the temporal and spatial patterns inscribed in the structures in question" (see also HAY, 2004).

Jessop ~~focuses, in particular, on the notion~~ of *spatio-temporal fixes*.

Conceptualised at the meso level, such fixes present the sites where economic and non-economic elements are aligned to secure the stability of actual modes of regulation and ~~where~~ capital can be valorised along structural and strategic lines.

**Structurally**, spatio-temporal fixes are formations that facilitate mobile capital to turn into spatially embedded assets connected with essential economic, notably and non-economic factors. This takes place within a broader context of societalization and the search for institutional compromises, through which the 'market economy' is embedded in a 'market society' (JESSOP and SUM, 2006).

**Strategically**, agents and groups will pursue specific aims in the interest of particular forms of capital (international, national or local) and social positions (civil society, labour). Such fixes can thus be seen as the outcome of structurally inscribed strategic selectivities that, in a reiterative confrontation with economic and non-economic conditions, create relatively and temporarily coherent and stable configurations. Such interests, and their privileging and articulations, are supported by imagined 'general interests' and associated spatial imaginaries. These can range from the local level ('industrial districts', 'science parks') and regional ('growth poles', 'clusters') to the national ('gateway', 'knowledge economy') and even international level (cf. Europe's Lisbon Agenda). Under global capitalism, it is *economic* imaginaries that prevail, although most imaginaries also address the broader embedding of the economic in social (political, ecological) formations. Imaginaries serve to define subjects and objects of regulation and to articulate visions underpinning particular strategies and projects. So it is here where we can see 'regulation as process' at work.

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Yet, some authors have criticised the SRA for providing only a limited conceptualisation of the relationship between strategic selectivity and the regulation of territorial development (MACLEOD, 1997, UITERMARK, 2005). So, in addition to spatiotemporal fixes, other notions of spatiotemporal selectivity have emerged. One is *scalar selectivity*, stemming from the way particular forms of activities become organised, and dominate, at different spatial levels. The result is that, in terms of COLLINGE (1999, p. 568), certain levels take priority over other levels, due to "the power which organizations at certain spatial scales are able to exercise over organizations at other, higher or lower scales". Yet these other levels may acquire important subsidiary roles, such as regions in global production networks, or the international level in the pursuit of nationally oriented interests. Collinge ~~makes a useful distinction between 'dominant' and 'nodal'~~ (subsidiary) scales. Within the context of the discussion here, a key question is how discursive scalar representations – which scales are deemed dominant – face up to the organisational and material needs and constraints of scalar structuration, an issue to be further explored below.

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Closely linked to scalar selectivity is *spatial selectivity*, the prioritisation of certain places in a wider territory, notably that of a state or configuration of states (e.g. EU). JONES (1997, p. 849) asserts how, through both material and discursive practices, "the state has the tendency to privilege certain places through accumulation strategies and hegemonic projects", such as large urban agglomerations or core regions. This happens intentionally through decisions on spatial planning, infrastructure, physical investments, regional policy and the design of multi-level governance structures. It also happens unintentionally, since most political decisions and policy outcomes are spatially biased, advantaging some areas while disadvantaging others. The state, in this context, should not be read as a unitary organisation, or be reified in substantive or functionalist terms (BRENNER, 2004). Rather, following an SRA line of thinking the state is considered as a *social relation*, itself a product of structurally-inscribed strategic selectivity. Structural inscription is born both internally, through the way the political system and state apparatus is organised, and externally, through the way the state is connected to other societal domains, notably business and civil society, and thus affected by shifts in societal governance and the role of capital. Such a relational (and relative) perspective on the state allows for a strong variety in state roles and effects. Close to Gramscian thinking, it explores the state in an inclusive sense, through its close ties with civil society and capital interests, while it also allows for major contradictions between economic and political orders (JESSOP, 2004c). Inclusiveness, relationality and relativity, however, do not mean a loss of the state's centrality. The state remains a key agent in allocating material resources and (co)producing development strategies, hegemonic projects and critical imaginaries.

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A final point concerns the role of economic vs. non-economic aspects of (spatial) developments and their representation. In conjunction with conceptualising the role of the state, Regulationist writings have aspired to assign more significance to non-economic factors than Marxist approaches, an important agenda further pursued by Jessop and other scholars working on the SRA. However, as illustrated by the characterisation of spatio-temporal fixes and the state, economic tendencies and factors remain imperative. What is problematic is not so much this pervasiveness as such, but the fact that it is perceived in terms of abstract tendencies rather than concrete processes and imaginations. On assessing the role of selectivities and fixes, economic 'forces' should not be reified or naturalised. Their role and determination should be seen as shaped and endorsed by particular actors, selected forms of knowledge and concrete courses of action, subject to specific economic conditions and constraints. Economic imaginaries should not be seen as the symbolic translations of material necessities. Rather, they are concepts that, leaning on the hegemonic position the economy has in the *discursive* articulation of societal processes and spatial development, serve a variety of economic and non-economic interests of capital, the state and other powerful actors. A critical question is thus to what extent the role and significance assigned to economic factors presents more of a *discursive* than a strategic

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The way selectivity and spatio-temporal fixes are perceived raises the question of the role, and dominance, of economic determinants versus other, non-economic factors.

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selectivity (GIBSON-GRAHAM, 1996, HAY, 2002). With this caveat in mind, we will now discuss the rise of regional imaginaries following Sum's model.

### **The rise of the 'region': from the windows of change to discursive-selective moments**

Of Sum's five moments, one could argue that recent literature on regional formation has largely been oriented towards the latter two, and especially the last one, that of institutionalisation and the shaping of new forms of (regional) governance. PAASI's (1991, 2001) conceptualisation of region formation, for instance, runs from the concrete imagining of regions as bounded and somehow distinct territorial units (fourth moment) to the development of regional institutions and the establishment of a region in the consciousness of the wider community (fifth moment). More than reflecting historical and cultural entities, or direct responses to 'global' structural change, as Paasi has compellingly argued, regions result from processes of regionalisation that should be understood in terms of social construction, with emphasis on the narrative dimension of such construction. Like other elements of social space, regions are "both products and constituents of social action" (PAASI, 2001, p. 13), sustained by four basic processes, namely territorial, institutional and symbolic shaping, and internal and external recognition ('establishment'). Regions are perceived as 'action spaces' (SCHMITT-EGNER, 2002), territorially bounded on the basis of (sometimes self-induced) discursive and institutional processes. In the words of another prominent theorist on region formation, BLOTEVOGEL (2000, p. 500): "the region is a social construct as well as vehicle of goal rationality and power". The nurturing of a collective ('we') identity forms an important part of boosting internal and external recognition, and the way regions are seen and treated as 'bounded'. But, as Blotevogel indicates, there are serious limits to what processes of identity shaping can do, notably when they are driven by the allegedly strategic actors in processes of region formation: "it is striking with how much thoughtlessness and outright imprudence politicians, planners and particularly marketing 'experts' seek to construct regions and regional identity" (BLOTEVOGEL, 2000, p. 502).

KEATING (1998), on the other hand, pays more attention to the wider political, economic and social context in which regions have emerged and settled. Yet, his analysis remains confined to explaining, in rather broad terms, the regional phenomenon against the backdrop of grand economic, political and societal shifts, complemented by more specific institutional reviews at national levels. This does not explain how strategic choices and practices in the production of narratives and imaginaries privileging the region have actually worked. Other authors have provided partial clues to this question, by addressing some of the aspects within the realm of the first three moments (e.g. G. MACLEOD, 2001). Yet, there remains considerable scope for a more systematic analysis of how the rise of the region as eminent objects and subjects of strategic action came about. Following Sum's

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framework, such an analysis should start several moments back, when the windows of change open and inter-discursive selectivity manifests itself.

Various windows of change can be identified that, from the 1980s onwards, have had a major impact on the discursive and strategic position of the region. The first window can be understood in terms of the widely debated transition from a Fordist to post-Fordist forms of regulation and accumulation. This transition is seen as being accompanied by a fundamental shift in the basic focus of regulation from the wage relation to dynamic competition (JESSOP and SUM, 2006), affecting, in particular, the distribution of wealth and management of demand. Regulation thus moved from an interventionist 'Keynesian' financial transfer from capital to labour, to one focused on innovation, fostered by close links by research and business activities, flexible work practices, and novel forms of financing and financial management, for instance through venture capital schemes. Because of the increased significance of specialisation and networks, one can add to this list a regulatory need for more communication, coordination and strategic orientation. While old 'Keynesian' arrangement continued to play a major role, although in a reduced form, in securing basic macro economic conditions at the national level, these new regulatory practices have been developed and tried out in the context of new forms of *regional* governance. In Jessop and Sum's (2006) terms, these forms thus present the loci of the search for new spatio-temporal fixes. Such fixes should not be understood as fully substituting for national 'fixes', but as particular arrangements that play a specific role in the overall regulatory processes, subject to a wide range of specific mediations and strategic manipulations (JONES, 2004).

The conceptualisation and practicing of governance forms and institutional fixes at the regional level are dominated by attempts to articulate the economic with the non-economic. This affects, in particular, the shaping of localised systems of production. Regional governance and institutions serve to build up and sustain specialised assets that can not be easily subjected to 'pure' economic coordination and calculation, but that are vital for the creation of innovative potential and increasing productivity. Such assets include high levels of education, interactive processes of innovation and flexible production, the attuning of spatial-environmental factors, and the more advanced regulatory demands as documented above. Moreover, the emphasis on 'institution building' and the nurturing of 'governance capacity' at the regional level has been pushed by the disapproval of direct forms of state intervention and subsidies (CERNY, 2006, GUALINI, 2001). Rather than (sectoral groups of) firms, territorially defined entities such as regional clusters, networks and partnership turned into popular objects of economic support.

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Parallel to the first window, a second window can be identified which stems from developments in state governance. The post-war rise of the welfare state has resulted in a countless number of regulatory 'interventions' and practices, posing major problems of coordination and control. The sheer number and complexity of

these interventions have meant that state apparatuses in Western countries have lost much of their strategic overview and administrative capacity to manage societies. Supported by calls for ‘modernising’ government, states feel the urgent need to search for new ways to coordinate and align policy processes, in what can be called new forms of ‘meta-governance’ (JESSOP, 2004c). This includes the advocacy for more market-conform and market-oriented forms of policy-making, more public participation in all stages of policy-making, and a better use of modern technologies (such as ICT) to enhance effectiveness and reduce policy fragmentation. Through their potential to realign and reorganise policy domains, spatial-scalar strategies represent appealing instruments to meet such intricate demands. Regions, in particular, feature as domains where new forms of policy effectiveness, public participation and, as a result, legitimacy can be cultivated and tested (GUALINI, 2004). The problem of coordination is compounded, moreover, by the rising importance of supranational bodies and treaties. The EU, in particular, has turned to the region as a site to align its territorial strategies with that of the national and local levels. From a more negative point of view, such new state spatialities and selectivities can also be read as attempts to offload difficult responsibilities and financial burden onto lower levels in order to reduce the administrative and financial distress for central state levels.

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The local-regional level itself provides a third window, or more precisely set of windows due to a number of recent developments. Changing physical conditions and usages, notably in transport and land-use patterns, have increased the need for coordination at the inter-municipal or city-regional level. Urban sprawl, fiscal crises in core cities, congestion, land shortages and other territorial problems require the build-up of coordination and planning capabilities at supra-local levels. In many cases, this is not easy to achieve, since there is often much distrust and rivalry between adjacent local authorities, notably between core cities and suburban municipalities (HERRSCHEL and NEWMAN, 2002, PORTER and WALLIS, 2002). On a more positive note, regional governance and strategy making has been fostered by the advocacy of sustainable territorial forms of transport, housing, energy use etc. Images of sustainable regions and ‘eco-regions’ have made major inroads into the vocabulary and practices of regional planning (HAUGHTON and COUNSELL, 2004). A final impetus stems from a cultural-political drive through which the creation of regional governance is advanced by notions and expressions of territorial identity (KEATING, 1998, PAASI, 2001).

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These various windows, with their embedded selectivities, are being framed, performed, and associated by variety of genres and genre chains. As explained before, genre chains provide the re-contextualisation of prevailing communicative ideas and conventions, and serve to translate these in specific forms like policy-making processes, in what is called an ‘inter-discursive selective moment’. Genres that have made a major contribution here include the emphasis on competitiveness in a ‘globalising’ economy, grafted onto neo-liberal economic perspectives, the emphasis on participatory and integrative forms of policy making associated with a shift from ‘government’ to ‘governance’, debates on the



‘nodal’ region embedded within ‘global’ flows of capital, goods, and knowledge, and sustainable perspectives on territorial development. The critical question is how these ideas and issues have been sutured into the canvass of the region. Who and what mediated the selection? What kind of metaphors, knowledges and technologies become dominant? What presentations of ‘problems’ and ‘solutions’ are adopted in policy processes? How are policy outcomes and associated territorial developments monitored and relayed? And to what extent are these aspects differentiated in space and time?

There is no space here for responding to these questions in detail (see also other papers in this issue SPECIFY??). What is especially interesting for the purpose of this paper is the outcome in terms of *discursive* selectivity. How is strategic selectivity perceived and translated into strategic ideas and actions? What kind of ideas and translations are feasible and pressed forward? In other words, how are genre chains constructed and performed? What we are after, in particular, is how, in a complex environment, specific multiplicities emerge and evolve, how certain themes are articulated, and how these are associated with particular, powerful imaginaries. For the conceptualisation of the region, this will be debated by focusing, in the light of the windows just presented, on two aspects: the spatial/scalar dimension and, as a major substantive issue, the articulation of the ‘economic’ and ‘non-economic’.

### Spatial-scalar configurations

Scale presents a core theme in the literature on the region and wider geographical debate. What is interesting for the discussion here is the way the region is associated with both scalar and non-scalar perspectives. All windows identified above give rise to *scalar* perspectives. They all provide accounts of how governance aspects are scaled ‘down’ or ‘up’ to the regional level to make the latter ‘strategically selective’. From an economic angle, the coordination of economic support, notably on the supply-side, is seen as partly shifting from the national-sectoral to the regional level. The state governance window advances similar shifts in terms of strategic responsibilities for policy integration and planning. Amongst the territorial windows, an upscaling of core competencies is envisaged from the local to the region levels. Initially, this debate was centred on a political notion of *devolution*, in which regions would gain substantial political autonomy against a ‘hollowed out’ central state, with Spain and Belgium as exemplary cases. More recent observations, based on for instance experiences in England and Eastern Europe, or discussions on multi-level governance in the context of Europeanisation, point at policy *decentralisation*. This means that, under a continued role of the nation state as a central orchestrator, the region becomes part of a nested system of policy-making and implementation (GUALINI, 2006, JONES, 2004, McMASTER, 2006). Scale management then becomes an intrinsic part of detailed forms of state regulation (JESSOP, 2004b).

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*Non-scalar* perspectives do not start from a territorially compartmentalised and nested worldview. They focus on the spatiality of socio-economic practices, with emphasis on flow and connectivity. In an economic sense, regions are seen as hosting novel forms of socio-economic governance, able to position their territories strategically in wider circuits of economic and political interaction. Well-known, iconic examples of such territories are Silicon Valley, the Italian industrial districts and various high-tech clusters across the globe. These regions do not fill preordained scales but present, to use Storper's label, 'worlds' of action operating in the context of global flows and networks. Interestingly, also in policy debates and agendas, regions are associated with spatial configurations not in a 'partitioned' or 'devolved' sense, but as the basis for new, often network-oriented, policy practices. Examples include the experimental regions hosting novel forms of economic and territorial governance in Germany and The Netherlands (GUALINI, 2004), and the advocacy of (city)regional nodes and gateways as part of network perspectives on spatial development and as responses to specific territorial problems (PORTER and WALLIS, 2002). In all these cases, spatiality is constituted primarily through the specific policy practice, rather than a premeditated aspiration to engage in scalar structuration and patterns of state spatiality (BRENNER, 2004). In the Dutch and German case, for instance, the experimental regions have emerged at levels and in configurations that differ markedly, and explicitly, from well-established regional partitions, such as 'Provinces' and 'Bezirke'. Obviously, engagement with scalar politics may be inevitable once policy practices become more established.

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As discussed in much more detail in Jones et. al (THIS ISSUE??), scale is subject to a hefty theoretical and political debate. While some authors tend to see scalar and non-scalar perspectives in strongly oppositional terms, the position adopted here (and throughout this issue??) is one of exploring and advocating the articulation and mutual constitution of both perspectives. For assessing the inter-discursive moment for producing hegemonic notions of the region, such a complementary view is certainly most relevant. One could argue that, in the intersecting of the three types of windows identified above, the *compatibility* between both perspectives is critical. It is the way more innovative, strategic ideas based on notions of nodes-in-network and territorial forms of policy-integration are embedded in multi-scaled accounts privileging regional governance that provides a major source of inspiration and rhetorical strength for the articulation of regional imaginaries. And it is, moreover, the economic orientation of such accounts that have contributed to this strength, as will be discussed now.

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## Economic vs. non-economic orientations

Discourses on the region, and the imaginaries they sustain, tend to be strongly oriented towards economic aspects of regional development, both in circuits of practitioners and academics (LAGENDIJK, 2006). This dominance has been documented, in more detail, by Jones (2004) for the English regions, De Bruijn et

al. (2005) for the EU and Jensen and Richardson (JENSEN and RICHARDSON, 2004) for a wider variety of regions and policy domains. This does not mean that economic development, notably its neoliberal connotation of ‘competitiveness’, is always framed as the primary goal or condition. It can also present a strategic aspect that needs to be ‘accommodated’ in the light of non-economic social, ecological or territorial objectives, induced by the second and third set of windows identified above. Accordingly, what prevails in the inter-discursive moment, through the articulation of genre chains, is the interweaving of economic notions of the region with symbols and stories on sustainability, social cohesion, community development, governance building, and participative and strategic forms of planning (JENSEN and RICHARDSON, 2004, LAGENDIJK, 2005). Especially the EU has been a key mediator of genre chains that link ‘competitiveness’ aims to conditions of sustainability and spatial-social cohesion (‘balanced development’) (DE BRUIJN and LAGENDIJK, 2005). It has also been a core catalyst in nurturing process of institutional change and network building. To a varying degree, many other (supra)state organisations have played similar roles, with in their wake a large number of consultancies, advisory councils, business associations, regional organisations and figureheads, and not to forget, academics (LOVERING, 1999)

This articulation of economic and non-economic aspects happens at various levels, from goal-setting and strategy-making to concrete operations. First, the level of *goal- and agenda-setting* is inspired primarily by the more socially and ecologically accommodating perspectives of neo-liberalism, in which the emphasis on the economy has been somewhat tempered (CERNY, 2006). The latter helps to respond to pressures coming through the second and third window, supported by different state bodies (from local to international levels), to include non-economic orientations and demands. Second, at the level of *strategies and practices*, the economic primarily plays a conditional role. The preferred modes of action and coordination are based on notions of social interaction and governance (collaboration, partnerships, institution building) and even planning (programmes and projects). This is not the result of external pressures, however, but of the discursive selectivity of the first window itself, in which the embedding of non-economic assets and values is seen as critical for economic performance. From the policy side, another combination arises. Pushed by neoliberal perspectives on state management, non-economic interests in effectiveness and legitimacy are blended with a strong emphasis on financial prudence, efficiency and accountability. The final level is that of specific *initiatives and projects*. This is also subjected to the mix of effectiveness and efficiency/accountability conditions carried over from the strategic level, now interwoven with notions of internal communication and project management.

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Like the spatial-scalar theme, the topic of economic vs. non-economic manifests the multiplicity of ideas underlying the shaping of ‘regional imaginaries’ and associated practices. What is different, however, is the nature of discursive selectivity. Not only is a certain economic orientation inescapable, this also

applies to non-economic aspects. Because of this double constraint, achieving some form and degree of coherence poses a major challenge. The situation is compounded by the fact that the regional setting for strategy making and project development only presents a fragment in a much wider 'policy space' (GUALINI, 2004), which subjects them to additional sets of constraints and interdependencies. A major handicap, partly resulting from this, is the spurious nature of many regional knowledges, and their incompatibilities once they are put into practice (PAINTER, 2002). In terms of Fig. 2, long feedback loops and a high of misrepresentations, reducing the potential for effective strategic learning and

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## Towards the configuration of subjects and institutionalisation of regions

In constructing imaginaries, regions, and core agents and processes associated with regions, are framed as both objects and subjects of governance. More specifically, state agents including local, national and international state organisations, as well as non-state regionally dependent actors, such as businesses, community actors and NGOs employ the genre chains discussed above to charge regions politically and strategically (JONAS and PINCELT, 2006, JONES, 2001). This charging is double edged. On the one hand, it comes with strong discursive and strategic selectivity, in the form of specific ambitions ('balanced development'), categorisations (e.g. EU's NUTS-II partition), knowledges (SWOT, innovation, sustainability, etc), and governing procedures technologies (scripts for writing strategies and funding applications, etc). On the other hand, embedded within this selectivity is the notion of the region as a prominent *subject* of strategy making and orchestrator of policy initiatives and projects, and as a globally active broker to obtain ideas, partners and funding. The exemplary agent caught between manifold demands and the urge to be proactive and strategic is the Regional Development Agency (MCMASTER, 2006).

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In regulatory terms, such double-edged subjectivisation can be attributed to the move from an interventionist state dealing directly with economic and social subjects, to a more 'distant' state facilitating and regulating sites of governance such as local communities (e.g. for social policy), sectors or clusters (e.g. for labour market and economic policies) and regions (e.g. for innovation policy and all kinds of territorial management). It is in this context that regions have been constructed as specific, novel new regulatory sites endowed with a strategic form of agency. At a concrete level, while there are strong similarities in selectivities, one should note the differences in the ways such constructions have worked out notably in specific nation states. For instance, regionalisation in Spain and Belgium, driven by community and identity interests, differs markedly from developments in England, led by a centralised political agenda, or most East European countries, where the administrative processes of EU accession have played a dominant role. Similarly, means of control and funding vary from high levels of autonomy (Spain, US) and contractual approaches (France) to detailed centralised budgetary control (England, Netherlands) and meticulous accounting

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practices (EU). Accordingly, these various types come with different, although often comparable practices of shaping the territorial, symbolic and institutional-political form of the region (PAASI, 1991, 2001).

Taking the argument one step further, the question is to what extent regions, or more precisely, regional engagement in ‘regulation as process’, can be associated with new spatio-temporal fixes. Put differently, what kinds of strategic positions and selectivities result from the discursively hegemonic position of regional imaginaries? Beyond doubt, strong positions have been achieved by regions that, as sub-states, form part of (semi)federal states. These regions have generally benefited from the devolution of major regulatory powers, which does not rule out the possibility that the distribution of certain responsibilities and resources can be strongly contested. A less clear-cut picture emerges for regions in non-federal countries. Here, regulatory practices tend to remain heavily dependent on external knowledges, sources and control. ‘Regulation as process’ takes the form of complex, multi-layered networks in which regions only present a fragment in wider chains of political actions and policy-making. While they may be endowed with significant roles of experimenting and synthesising, notably of ‘soft’ kinds, it does not present a good basis for achieving ‘structured coherence’ in a regulatory sense.

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There is a certain tension, accordingly, between the discursive and strategic aspects of region construction. Discursively, the region tends to be portrayed as a dominant site and scale of ‘advanced’ and ‘globalising’ capitalist development, both in how it can support economic dynamism and how this is embedded in a territorially bounded social-institutional formation. Discursive selectivity, to use the terminology of COLLINGE (1999), points at the region as a ‘dominant’ scale of regulation. This selectivity strategically serves the interests of other sites and levels, notably that of the nation state, but also points at the role of strategies pursued by local and international capital (JONAS and PINCETL, 2006). Although regional positions vary strongly notably across regions, in a regulatory sense their role is generally confined to a nodal one. In effect, as recently manifested by the English case, the way regions tend to be portrayed as generic ‘powerhouses’ for addressing socio-economic problems from the local (inequality) to the national level (competitiveness) presents a form of *regulatory conceit* based on a double misrepresentation (JONES, 2001). First, the way economic dynamism is projected onto a single (regional) scale is highly problematic. And second, in JONES’ own words: “This philosophy is doubly misleading if it then assumes that all regional governance structures can effectively intervene in the economy, regulate its contradictions, and ensure economic growth” (JONES, 2001, p. 1196).

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There is, however, another side to the way regional governance is subjected to external imperatives and constraints, namely that of strategic action initiated by regional agents themselves. By employing alternative repertoires of regional discourses and action, potentially resisting economically imperialist, ‘global’ accounts (GIBSON-GRAHAM, 1996, MASSEY, 2004), regions may at least partially

become their own author of subjectivities. One example of such counteraction is the way certain American city-regions and even states have taken (sometimes legal) action to conform to the Kyoto agreements on greenhouse gas reduction, against the Washington doctrine of non-compliance. Another example is the drive of semi-autonomous regions like in Spain or Belgium to stretch the boundaries of their political autonomy, also by subverting the present political and institutional division of power and resources (KEATING, 1998). Obviously, such local shifts in discursive and strategic selectivities do not automatically come with a window for (positive) change. Structural constraints, notably of a material kind, may impose strong limitation on actual possibilities for developing alternative tracks of action. Moreover, like with state selectivities, such shifts may prioritise certain interests and scales at the expense of others (for instance social vs. environmental, or a wealthy, powerful region against weaker ones).

## Conclusion

How can we understand the rise of the region as an apparently ‘omnipresent’ phenomenon? And what does that mean for regional governance and practices? Recent contributions to this debate have been criticised for overemphasising ‘soft’ aspects of regional socio-economic developments, thus losing sight of the broader picture as provided by ‘harder’ approaches as inspired by Regulationist ideas. Also, although ‘soft’ approaches are keen to explore discursive aspects of regional development, due to an inward-looking nature they do not shed much light on the ‘omnipresence’ in a broader context of political-economic developments and policy-making. In response, this paper has sought to reflect on the unfolding of specific regional practices and forms within the light of broader changes and tendencies. Core concepts for this approach have been drawn from the Strategic Relational Approach and, in particular, Sum’s evolutionary model of ‘discursive hegemony’. A core result is the linking of socially constructive and institutionally oriented notions of region-building as advocated by Paasi (corresponding to the latter ‘moments’ in Sum’s model) to the role of structurally inscribed strategic selectivity and associated discursive selectivities (corresponding to earlier ‘moments’). The latter are, in turn, embedded in a regulatory perspective on political-economic development.

The ‘omnipresence’ of the region, we may conclude, presents a form of discursive hegemony associated with strategic selectivities manifesting complex spatial and scalar (and often non-regional) orientations. From a historical perspective, the region presented an available window to experiment with new regulatory forms and ‘fixes’. This has been aimed, in particular, at improving economic performance through its embedding in the non-economic, and on accommodating non-economic targets (cohesions, sustainability). On this account, it is not so much the regional spatial configuration or scalar reconfiguration, but the need for a ‘blank’ (sub-state) level of governance that has given a major impetus to regional discursive ‘hegemony’. At the level of regulation as ‘process’, on the

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other hand, practices and forms of governance have evolved as fragments in a much wider space of political actions and policy-making. It is in this wider (national and international) space that multiple ideas and scripts are circulated and combined with the help of genre chains. Through these chains, regions are portrayed as core sites to promote policy integration and territorial coordination, and, last but not least, innovative (but also ‘balanced’) forms of economic development. The result is enacted significance, but not coherence. On the contrary, with the exception of regions where coherence is institutionally induced (like in federal systems), these fragments are themselves torn in many directions. Regions are continuously subjected to multiple spatial and scalar selectivities of state and other dominant organisations. It comes down to organisations like RDAs to cope with such centrifugal forces and instabilities. Accordingly, together with local business, state and community organisation, they have to weave an image of coherence, functionality and identity through a myriad of programmatic activities.

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Is the region an accident? As an object of governance, the region turned out to be at the right place and time, responding to, and bringing together, various windows of opportunity. Perceived from that background, the ‘discursive hegemony’ sustaining the region’s significance, including the emphasis on its regulatory position, seems far from accidental. However, although facilitated and framed by this hegemony, the rise of a large variety of concrete, regionally oriented forms and practices of governance and policy-making can be attributed to numerous accidental combinations of economic, political and institutional developments and representations. While privileging the region, they may also constitute forms of centrifugal instability opening the window for other spatialities and forms of governance. Whither the region?

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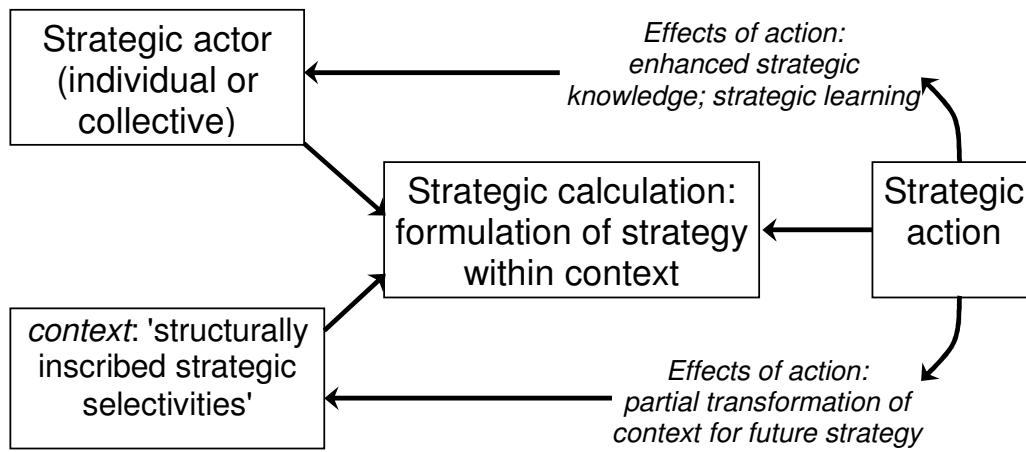


Fig 1 The strategic relational approach (after Hay 2002)

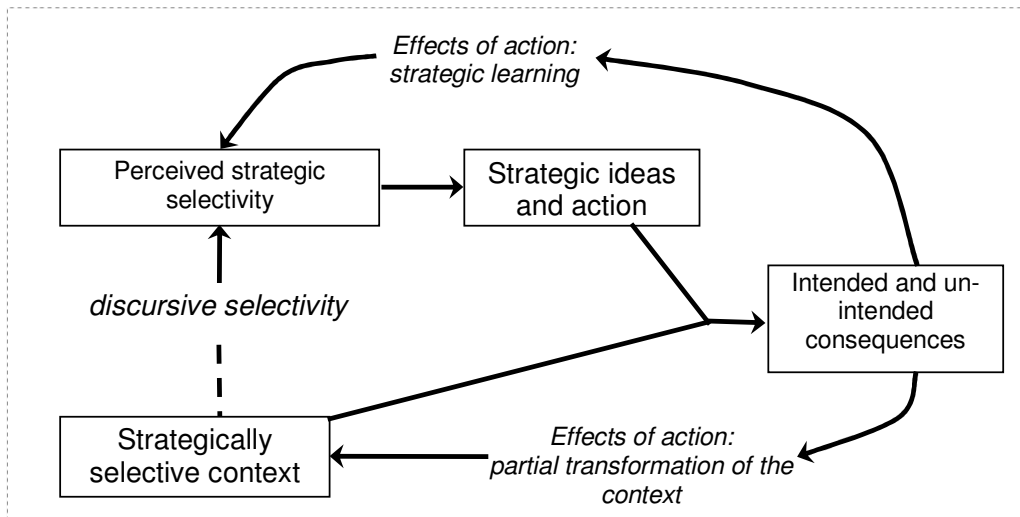


Fig 2. Discursive selectivity, after Hay (2002)

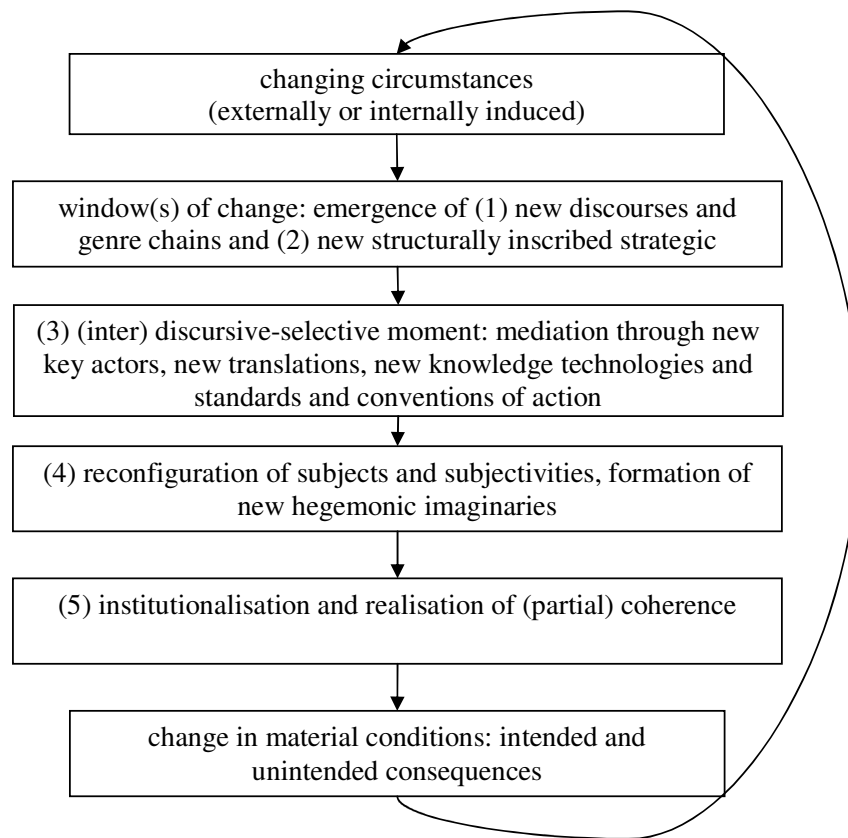


Figure 3 The production of hegemony, after Sum (2004)